National Aboriginal Youth Strategy

Prepared for the Working Group

of the National Aboriginal Youth Strategy

By

Words That Matter Inc.

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A bridge to the future, a link with the past

We must cherish our inheritance. We must preserve our nationality for the youth of tomorrow.

—Louis Riel, 1885

We believe our heritage, culture and religion are what make us human beings. It is very difficult in the city to learn these things because many of the knowledgeable people who know about it and can help us with it don't live here. We must have help and resources so that we can reach out to these people and build connections between us and them.

—Young person's comments to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996

Aboriginal youth are reaching for the future and reclaiming their past.

This document was created by a team of representatives of Aboriginal organizations, and federal, provincial and territorial governments.

It outlines The National Aboriginal Youth Strategy, which was created to raise awareness about the challenges facing these young people. This Strategy is built on the belief that people working together can make a better world for their youth. This document is intended for Aboriginal youth, and for anyone who wants to help them achieve these goals.

Aboriginal young people are the future leaders, educators, professionals and role models for their communities and for Canada. They are also a vital link to precious cultural and historical traditions. While they master the new technology and fuel the new economy, they will be the ones who tend the sacred fires and carry on the wisdom of the Elders.

Aboriginal youth have an important role to play in shaping the Canada of the twenty-first century. These young people form the fastest growing segment of Canada's young population.

They are a large group of people who have a right to expect opportunity, challenge and fulfilment. They have the potential to make invaluable contributions that will enrich the lives of us all, and they are our best hope and opportunity to heal past wounds and avoid future mistakes.

However, too many Aboriginal youth are losing their past and their future. The living conditions of some deprive them of their cultural and historical traditions, and fail to offer the support and training they need to live up to their hopes and ambitions.

One goal of the Strategy is to unite Aboriginal youth, Aboriginal communities, governments, institutions, the private sector, concerned individuals, and community and volunteer groups in a common objective: To help Aboriginal young people live happier, more productive and more fulfilling lives.

The aim is a society in which the Aboriginal young person has the same opportunities as every other young Canadian. The long-term result will be stronger and more prosperous Aboriginal communities.

Some of the things we, as a nation, can do are:

- Involve Aboriginal youth as partners in the decisions that affect their future.
- Remove barriers to social, educational and economic opportunities.
- Implement measures that enable Aboriginal youth to enjoy a higher quality of life now, so they can plan their futures and fulfil their dreams.

- Create business and employment opportunities through community economic development.

Aboriginal youth are important players in the Strategy. They know best what their challenges and aspirations are, and it is likely they will be the ones to offer some of the most creative solutions.

The Strategy was devised by participants at the federal and provincial levels, in consultation with the youth representatives from the following Aboriginal organizations:

- The Assembly of First Nations
- The Congress of Aboriginal Peoples' National Youth Conference
- The Métis National Youth Advisory Council
- The National Inuit Youth Council
- The Native Women's Association of Canada Youth Structure

What those of us who are involved in this Strategy hope to create is a menu of ideas, a gathering point for people and groups who desire changes and wish to play a role in making those changes happen. What the changes will be, or how they will come about remain to be seen, because no one can predict what answers will come when smart people with good intentions put their energies into meeting challenges and finding solutions.

Collective action

Wisdom lies within each of us.

The most effective actions are ones that draw on the thoughts and the ideas of the individual while tapping into the collective wisdom of the society.

National Aboriginal Youth Advisory Council

The importance of involving Aboriginal youth in all phases of the Strategy cannot be stressed enough. To this end, an initiative suggested in the Strategy is the formation of a National Aboriginal Youth Advisory Council. Through this Council, Aboriginal youth would have a greater say in federal government policies and programs, and in the development of the Strategy itself.

This youth involvement in the Council will help government and organizations develop ways for Aboriginal young people to find out about and make use of new and existing programs and services. Initiatives such as the Aboriginal Youth Network Web site, www.ayn.com, can go a long way toward involving Aboriginal young people in the programs and services that are designed to help them.

Just as important is the need to recognize and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal communities. The well-being of the child depends on the well-being of the family and the community. The community creates the environment for strong families, which produce happy children. To build strong communities and families, individuals need to be able to take control of their lives, economically, socially and culturally.

Respect for culture and traditions

Any plan of action to meet the needs of Aboriginal youth should reflect a deep respect for the traditional wisdom, customs, culture and history of the various Aboriginal nations. By doing this, policies, programs and services can be created that foster harmony among the spiritual, emotional, physical, intellectual, cultural and economic needs and aspirations of Aboriginal young people.

Policies, programs and services can be tailored to the specific needs of various communities by involving all sectors of Aboriginal society—Elders, band councils, social services, reserve police, sports and recreation specialists, and health professionals. This collective effort is essential to make the Strategy flexible, adaptable and responsive enough to confront local and global issues as they emerge.

There also needs to be an awareness of the different needs of rural and urban young people, so youth on the reserve and in the city can enjoy the same services and opportunities. For example, more education and employment opportunities need to be

brought to rural Aboriginal youth, and urban Aboriginal young people want to be able to enjoy the same involvement in their culture and heritage as their counterparts on reserves.

Individual challenges

Aboriginal youth and their families need to break out of the vicious circle of poverty and disadvantage.

The morally and socially destructive effects of abuse and crime, the erosion of cultural identity, the breakdown of the family, the difficulty of getting a decent education—all these things demoralize the community and destroy the individual's feelings of self-worth. The situation among rural and urban Aboriginal peoples is serious, and First nations, Inuit and Métis communities need help and support to fix it.

If Aboriginal youth do not get the help they need to meet the challenges they face, many will never realize their potential.

Experience shows that where action has been taken to address these challenges, significant progress has been made:

- The life expectancy of Aboriginal people is increasing, a reflection of better health care and health education.
- Higher numbers of Aboriginal youth are enrolled in universities and colleges.
- While unemployment levels are still a problem, the wages paid to Aboriginal youth are almost equal to those of other Canadian youth.

These improvements show the benefits of cooperation among governments, agencies, communities and the private sector. Past successes prove that partnerships work when it comes to dealing with the serious challenges outlined in this document.

While people become stronger when they work together, problems become easier to solve when they are taken one at a time. The first step in this process is to break the challenges into the six main areas of concern, and establish an over-all goal for each one.

The six areas of concere that Canadian society must eddress are:

Employment

To address the economic challenges facing Aboriginal young people, we need to expose them to the range of economic opportunities available, and increase their participation in these economic opportunities.

Education

To better prepare Aboriginal young people to embark on rewarding careers, we have to help them to stay in school and offer them better opportunities for education and training.

Health

To assure that Aboriginal young people can enjoy a good quality of life, we need to promote a healthy lifestyle through education, better health care, and sports and recreation.

Community

To provide a safe, stable and supportive environment for young people, we have to work with Aboriginal communities to fight the problems that weaken societies and families.

Culture

To support Aboriginal youth as they seek to reclaim their cultural heritage, we need to respectfully promote Aboriginal language, history, customs, traditions and values.

Politics

To help Aboriginal youth take control over their lives, we have to encourage them to become active in community politics, and in federal, provincial and territorial political affairs.

The next step is to examine the individual issues in each area, and find solutions for each one.

Earning a living

Most of the adverse conditions that affect Aboriginal youth and their communities are conditions of poverty—abuse, neglect, low-level education, sexual exploitation, unemployment, substance abuse. To deal with these problems at their sources is to fight poverty. That means helping First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities meet the economic challenges confronting their youth.

Unemployment

More than a third of Aboriginal youth were unemployed in 1996—about twice as many as among their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Male Aboriginal youth were more than twice as likely to be jobless than other male Canadian youth. In 1995, average personal incomes among Aboriginal youth on- and off-reserve in most provinces and territories lagged behind those of other Canadian youth.

When Aboriginal youth do find work, it tends to be insecure. About 28 percent of all Aboriginal youth reported some employment in 1995, and nearly 80 percent of them were employed on a part-year or part-time basis. While it is generally true that young people tend to start out in part-time jobs, only about 5.6 percent of Aboriginal youth manage to secure full-time employment, a rate roughly half that of non-Aboriginal youth.

Aboriginal young people are more likely than other Canadian youth to live in low-income households. In 1996, more than 45 percent of all Aboriginal youth lived in homes with incomes below the poverty line—a rate nearly twice that of other Canadian young people.

The first step in helping Aboriginal youth improve their economic prospects is to find ways for young people to learn about the range of economic opportunities available. The second step is to find ways for Aboriginal young people to take advantage of their opportunities.

Career opportunities

The primary aim of economic programs and services for Aboriginal young people should be to increase income levels for families and youth by helping more young people find work. At the same time, programs and services should be designed to help Aboriginal youth expand their horizons, to encourage them to move into professions in which Aboriginal people are under-represented, or to develop the skills necessary to launch their own business ventures. This means there should be programs and services geared to helping Aboriginal youth learn about the full range of careers—the employment and business opportunities that exist and how young people can prepare themselves for the various fields.

What can be done now:

- Share information about opportunities arising out of land claims, self-government, business and entrepreneurship.
- Teach high school students about their economic opportunities.
- Offer information about the job market.
- Provide pre-employment training and counselling.
- Help place youth in job-apprenticeship programs.
- Develop partnerships between the private and public sectors to create employment opportunities.
- Encourage mentorship relationships between community and business leaders, and Aboriginal youth

Learning for life

Aboriginal youth tend to be less educated than other Canadian young people. This is true in every province and territory, and in rural and urban communities. As a result, Aboriginal youth enter the work force at a disadvantage. If the problems of unemployment, poverty and low self-esteem are to be addressed, education and literacy levels among Aboriginal youth must be improved.

More than two-thirds of Aboriginal youth who leave school do so without completing high school. A little more than two-thirds of Aboriginal young people between the ages of 15 and 19 are in school. This rate drops drastically—to about 31 per cent—for young people of university age. Only about 16 percent of Aboriginal youth in their early 20s who go to university earn a degree—roughly half the completion rate of non-Aboriginal youth in the same age group.

Progress cannot be made without hope, and education gives people hope by equipping them with skills and making them aware of their options.

Encourage youth to stay in school

The Strategy aims to promote a welcoming and stimulating environment for Aboriginal young people. This means finding ways to ensure all levels of education and training are sensitive to Aboriginal culture, needs and priorities.

More Aboriginal educators need to be brought into the school system, from kindergarten to the post-secondary levels. Early education programs aimed at Aboriginal children under six, should include strong emphasis on Aboriginal cultural and traditions.

Universities can help equip teachers and administrators to work with Aboriginal young people by linking Aboriginal Studies courses to teacher education.

By encouraging Aboriginal young people to stay in school and, whenever possible, continue on to college or university, more and more Aboriginal people will acquire the skills needed to make a significant impact on education and training in their communities. In turn, this will help bring about the changes that are needed for educational institutions to provide education and training that is relevant and useful to Aboriginal young people.

What can be done now:

- Provide more and better distance education, so both rural and urban Aboriginal youth can have access to learning.
- Develop programs to help prepare Aboriginal youth for colleges, universities and other post-secondary institutions such as vocational colleges and trade schools.

- Encourage Aboriginal youth by celebrating their achievements through awards, recognition and scholarships.
- Encourage Aboriginal youth to stay in school by helping graduates find jobs.
- Train non-Aboriginal educators to be sympathetic to Aboriginal culture and to understand the special needs of Aboriginal students

Healthy living

The main health challenges facing Aboriginal young people are mostly ones born of poverty and disadvantage. They include mental health and behavioural disorders ranging from fetal alcohol syndrome to addiction, to involvement in the sex trade. They include the physical afflictions—sexually transmitted diseases, diabetes, AIDS, teenage pregnancy, suicide, violent injury and death—that arise from destructive social conditions.

Statistics gathered between 1989 and 1993 show that the mortality rate among Aboriginal youth was about 3.6 times higher than that for other Canadian youth.

Suicide accounted for nearly a third of all deaths among Aboriginal youth. The rate among young males was more than five times that of their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Among female youth, the rate of suicide was nearly eight times that of other female Canadian youth. About three-quarters of the deaths among Aboriginal youth were caused by injuries or poisoning.

About 6.5 percent of Aboriginal young people reported disabilities that limited their ability to live normal, productive lives—a rate that is almost twice that of other Canadian youth.

A community approach to health

Ensuring Aboriginal youth can enjoy good physical and mental health involves more than just curing disease and dealing with problems after they have arisen. It means education, prevention and intervention. It also means taking a community approach to health that blends traditional Aboriginal healing with medical and social sciences.

This holistic approach would involve an entire range of health promotion, prevention, early intervention, treatment and rehabilitative measures.

The problems need to be dealt with at their roots. At the same time, there needs to be healing among the youth who have already fallen victim.

What can be done now:

- Promote a healthy way of life through information on nutrition, traditional diets and fitness.
- Learn about our traditional medicines and healing practices from our Elders.
- Provide support, counselling and guidance for young people who have been involved in the sex trade.
- Create safe houses where young people can be helped to heal themselves in a secure environment.

Active living

Some of the most important tools to help young people maintain physical and mental health are sports, recreation and active living. To increase young people's involvement in a rigorous way of life is to provide the opportunity for them to develop their bodies, minds and spirits through participation, competition, teamwork and personal achievement.

What can be done now:

- Teach Aboriginal youth the benefits of lifelong involvement in sports, recreation and active living.
- Support recreation, sports and active living at the community level.
- Help Aboriginal youth develop leadership skills as they improve their physical skills.
- Promote the development of Aboriginal sport and coaching development, through such events as the North American Indigenous Games and through the various National and Provincial/Territorial Aboriginal sports organizations.

Healthy communities

Young people need a stable, loving environment in which to grow.

If it takes a community to raise a child, then the community needs to be repaired before it can be expected to heal the children. Social problems feed on themselves: an abused child can grow up to be an abuser; parents who drink to excess or take drugs can raise substance abusers; family violence, neglect, boredom and hopelessness lead to crime. A cornerstone of the Strategy is the need to address the social challenges facing Aboriginal youth and their communities.

Too many Aboriginal people—especially youth—live unsettled lives. In 1995 and 1996, more than a third of Aboriginal young people reported a change in residence—a rate roughly 1.4 times higher than that of other Canadian youth. In 1996, one-quarter of Aboriginal youth lived in a one-parent family—about 1.6 times the rate of other Canadian youth. More than one in 10 were not living with their parents, a rate roughly seven times that of non-Aboriginal children. Aboriginal youth were three times more likely than other Canadian young people to be single parents.

Criminal activity—ranging from involvement in the sex and drug trades to property crimes, to violent crime—is a serious problem among Aboriginal youth. To a large extent, the crime rate is a reflection of the lack of opportunity offered to Aboriginal young people.

Aboriginal youth accounted for more than a third of youth taken into police custody in 1997-98. In 1996, the rate of incarceration in federal, provincial and territorial corrections facilities among Aboriginal teenagers was about nine times that of their non-Aboriginal peers. Among Aboriginal people aged 20 to 24, the rate was about seven times higher.

The ultimate aim of the Aboriginal Youth Strategy is to produce healthy First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities for tomorrow. This means working toward creating healthier communities today.

Create a circle of healing

At the community level, the aim is to create a circle of healing. The goals are to provide a loving, healthy and natural environment for all Aboriginal youth.

This means working to eliminate the hopelessness and loneliness that lead to youth suicides. Everything possible must be done to address the causes of child abuse and sexual exploitation of Aboriginal youth. Every effort must be made to make young people safer and more secure in their environments. And the ties between Aboriginal young people and their communities must be strengthened.

What can be done now:

- Decrease the number of Aboriginal children in community care by finding more Aboriginal adoptive families, and offering them the support they need to be able to raise adopted children.
- Establish temporary-exchange programs between Aboriginal communities and other communities, to offer Aboriginal young people a variety of learning experiences.
- Work to help Aboriginal communities reduce youth crime through early intervention, counselling, recreation, community policing and rehabilitation.
- Support child-care and day-care programs geared to Aboriginal communities and youth.
- Help Aboriginal communities set up and run their own child-protection and adoption services.

Vital culture

In 1996, about 20 percent of Aboriginal young people reported they spoke their native language—less than half the rate of their grandparents' generation. And only 15 percent reported using an Aboriginal language at home. A little less than half reported at least occasional participation in traditional Aboriginal activities. About one-quarter reported they had lived off the land for at least one week in 1991.

The language and the traditional ways are at risk of being lost. If Aboriginal culture disappears, a people will be dispossessed and all Canadian culture will be impoverished.

Like the young person quoted at the beginning of this document, we, as a nation, must believe "our heritage, culture and religion are what make us human beings."

A civilized and caring society respects and cherishes the language, history, customs and traditions of all its people, because this is the foundation upon which people construct their self-identity, their image of what kind of human beings they are.

Promote a strong personal identity

The Strategy recognizes the importance of passing down traditional values and heritage. To help make this happen, a strong personal identity must be promoted among Aboriginal young people by helping to preserve and promote all elements of Aboriginal culture, learning, history and tradition.

This means working to encourage participation by Aboriginal youth in cultural programs and traditional ceremonies, helping promote Aboriginal distinctiveness, and always acting in ways that are respectful of the uniqueness of Aboriginal peoples. This amounts to an overall attitude that should be reflected in every service and program. Everything that is done also should be done with the guidance and advice of the Elders.

Some of the things that can done are:

- Help create programs that promote Aboriginal language and culture in the cities as well as in Aboriginal communities.
- Make traditional culture an important part of Aboriginal youth programs.
- Have Aboriginal organizations and governments work together to promote cultural awareness.
- Create opportunities for Aboriginal youth to study and practise traditional art forms.
- Promote the teaching of Aboriginal languages, customs and traditions.

Strong democracy

In a democracy, the best way for people to see that their needs are met is to make sure their voices are heard, and Aboriginal people speak with a powerful collective voice that is getting stronger every year.

According to the 1996 Census, the part of the Canadian population that reported Aboriginal identity was 799,010. That is approximately equivalent to the population of Calgary. The Aboriginal population is growing at more than twice the rate of Canada's population as a whole. And, with almost half in cities, the Aboriginal population is becoming increasingly politically aware, activist and involved.

Aboriginal communities are "younger" than most other sectors of the Canadian population, and a larger proportion are entering the labour force.

More than half of the Aboriginal people in Canada are under the age of 25, and the average age among the Aboriginal population is about 25. That is roughly a decade younger than the average in other Canadian communities. The population of Aboriginal youth is expected to grow at a rate of about 1.4 percent a year through the next decade. At the same time, the number of Aboriginal people in the labour force is expected to grow by about 2.4 percent annually.

The national unemployment rate for Aboriginal youth is 34.4 percent, more than double the rate of 15.5 percent for non-Aboriginal young people.

Aboriginal youth must be active partners in the political process. These young people need real opportunities to participate in the political development of their communities, and in urban, federal, provincial and territorial political affairs.

All partners in the Aboriginal Youth Strategy should work to involve Aboriginal youth in all levels of government wherever and whenever possible.

Build political awareness

The way to do this is to help create political awareness among young people, to help them understand their political potential and power—and the potential and power of our political system.

What can be done now:

- Develop programs to encourage Aboriginal youth to take part in public and private sector boards, councils and committees.
- Make full use of Aboriginal leadership and political institutions to deliver programs and services to Aboriginal youth.

- Create training programs in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal governments can share information on the ways they do things.
- Establish programs for Aboriginal communities and governments to share knowledge by lending each other skilled staff members.
- Help create task forces in which Aboriginal youth can help deal with policy issues that affect them.

Where this plan came from

The Aboriginal Youth Strategy has been evolving over three years, through a series of conferences and meetings among Aboriginal groups and the federal, provincial and territorial governments.

It was born in November 1997, when provincial and territorial leaders, and the heads of the five national Aboriginal organizations called on the federal government to organize a meeting to address the challenges facing Aboriginal peoples across the country. The objective was to come up with a strategy to address the concerns, needs and desires of Aboriginal young people. The meeting would bring together Federal, Provincial and Territorial Aboriginal Affairs Ministers and National Aboriginal Leaders.

Six months later, in May 1998, just such a meeting took place in Quebec City. The Federal, Provincial and Territorial Aboriginal Affairs Ministers, and the National Aboriginal leaders agreed to develop the National Aboriginal Youth Strategy.

Out of this meeting, a working group was created to coordinate the strategy's development. Its members included representatives from:

- The five national Aboriginal organizations—the Assembly of First Nations, the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, the Métis National Council, and the Native Women's Association of Canada
- The federal government departments of Human Resources Development, Indian Affairs and Northern Development, and the Privy Council Office
- The governments of British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Quebec, Saskatchewan and the Yukon Territory

In August 1998, at the Annual Premier's Conference in Saskatoon, the provincial leaders declared their commitment to the strategy. They announced to the country that their Aboriginal affairs and labour-market ministers would work with national Aboriginal organizations to create a national strategy dealing with youth issues.

Seven months later, in March 1999, Premiers and National Aboriginal Leaders met in Regina to further discuss the strategy. They confirmed their continuing commitment to it, and called for it to proceed as quickly as possible.

The national Aboriginal Youth Strategy was approved on December 15, 1999, at a meeting of Federal-Provincial-Territorial Ministers responsible for Aboriginal Affairs, and National Aboriginal leaders. The Secretary of State for Children and Youth proposed a National Aboriginal Youth Conference as an important component of the implementation of the Strategy. Ministers and Aboriginal leaders supported the idea.

This document is the latest phase of the ongoing development of the Aboriginal Youth Strategy. It is designed to stimulate ideas that can be translated into action.

Getting started

The Aboriginal Youth Strategy is designed to explore all the factors affecting the well-being of Aboriginal youth.

Because the Strategy deals with such a broad range of issues, it has to draw on expertise from a wide variety of fields. This means establishing partnerships with as many Aboriginal, national and regional groups as possible. People working together can coordinate efforts, avoid duplication and get the most benefit from effort and investment.

Work has already begun on coordinating the efforts of provincial labour-market ministries with the National Aboriginal Youth Strategy. At the same time, national Aboriginal organizations have begun work on the Strategy. The national organizations that do not already have youth advisory groups are creating them. And the existing youth committees and advisory councils listed in the introduction are making significant contributions to the Strategy.

Federal, provincial and territorial Aboriginal Affairs Ministers and National Aboriginal Leaders will:

- Endorse the National Aboriginal Youth Strategy and encourage all governments, institutions and Aboriginal governments and organizations to work together to develop a range of policies, programs and services for Aboriginal youth.
- Direct the Strategy's Steering Committee to keep track of the development of those policies, programs and services, and report regularly to Ministers and Aboriginal Leaders on progress made.
- Encourage communication and cooperation between the National Aboriginal Youth Strategy and similar national and regional initiatives.
- Support the study of programs and services available to Aboriginal youth, to use the lessons learned to create a guide to what works best.

The Strategy is designed to be flexible, so it can deal with circumstances and issues as they develop. Its success depends on the long-term mobilization of Aboriginal, government and private-sector resources across the country.

This is just a beginning, and there is much to learn. With these first links between governments, Aboriginal communities and the private sector, construction has started on a Strategy that can deal with the variety of challenges facing Aboriginal youth in rural areas and cities across Canada.